


Soldiers

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Soldiers of the 173rd Abn. Bde.'s 1st Bn., 508th Inf. — seen here on the drop zone following a training jump — give SETAF a significant “forced-entry” capability.

SOLDIERS

Story and Photos
by Steve Harding



ASK most people which European countries host American soldiers, and the answer probably won't include Italy. It's an odd omission, given that the Mediterranean nation is home to one of the Army's most important combat organizations — the U.S. Southern European Task Force.

Headquartered at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, about 25 miles west of Venice, SETAF is the organization of choice when it comes to responding to crises and contingencies anywhere within U.S. European Command's area of responsibility. And that's a lot of area to cover, said MG Paul T. Mikolashek, SETAF's commander during **Soldiers'** visit.

"Our potential area of operations takes in more than 100 countries in Europe, Africa and the Middle East," he said. "And those operations can run the gamut from warfighting and peacekeeping to humanitarian relief and noncombatant evacuations."

Lethal and Deployable

SETAF is well organized to accomplish its wide range of missions. Its primary deployable unit is the Vicenza-based 173rd Airborne Brigade's 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry, which is organized and equipped as an airborne battalion combat team. Backed by supporting artillery, signal, medical, aviation and transportation units, the compact yet formidable 1-508th ABCT gives SETAF a significant "forced-entry" capability.

That ability to put troops and equipment on the ground quickly — whether to fight, rescue imperiled civilians or support peacekeeping

operations — makes SETAF a vital part of GEN Eric K. Shinseki's vision for the 21st-century Army, Mikolashek said.

"The chief of staff wants the Army to be able to provide rapidly deployable, sustainable, lethal forces that can respond on short notice to a crisis or contingency in a given area," he said. "SETAF provides that capability here and now."

It's a capability SETAF has demonstrated several times over the last few years. In August 1994, for example, the then-SETAF Infantry Brigade deployed to Rwanda to aid millions of displaced persons. In December 1995 SETAF soldiers formed the lead element of NATO's peace-implementation force in Bosnia-

Herzegovina. In 1996 and 1997 SETAF was active in the Balkans and Africa, and in 1999 supported Operation Allied Force in Kosovo and was tapped as part of NATO's strategic reserve for possible large-scale operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"We've been busy lately," said battalion CSM Mark Nielsen. "As both an airborne rapid-reaction force and a joint task force headquarters, SETAF is the United States' '911' rapid-reaction force in southern Europe. It's a job we take seriously, and it's one we spend a lot of time preparing for."

Training to Excel

Tough, challenging and realistic

"SETAF is the United States' '911' rapid-reaction force in southern Europe."



Paratroopers line up in “sticks” near Vicenza’s jump tower during training for Exercise Veneto Rescue 2000.

training is the key to SETAF’s success, its leaders say, and its soldiers train intensively.

“We focus quite a bit on honing basic soldier skills,” Nielsen said, “and we give our junior leaders a tremendous amount of responsibility. We ask a lot of them during real-world operations, and we want to make sure they’re up to the task.”

SETAF’s soldiers train at home station, at other areas within Italy, and regularly travel to Germany to take advantage of the training opportunities available at both Grafenwöhr and Hohenfels.

“We also train in former East Bloc countries,” Nielsen said, “and we work with soldiers from other nations who come to train with us. And we work closely with the Italians, of course.”

Airfield seizures and noncombatant evacuations are SETAF specialties, and conducting an annual full-scale exercise involving both ensures that soldiers are prepared to conduct such complicated and potentially hazardous missions, Mikolashek said. This year’s exercise, Veneto Rescue 2000, brought together 1-508th ABCT soldiers, Italian troops and helicopters, and Air Force transport and fighter aircraft.



Providing the highest possible quality of life for soldiers and family members is a key SETAF priority.

Conducted at sites in northern Italy and Slovenia, the exercise included a mass parachute drop of more than 425 U.S. and Italian soldiers, the securing of an imperiled “U.S. embassy” and the evacuation of several dozen “noncombatants.” [For more on “Veneto Rescue” see the September *Soldiers*.]

“This type of training is really valuable, since we get to practice our real-world missions,” said SGT Bruce L. Newpher of Co. A. “When you know you might have to do this for real, you definitely pay attention.”

First-Class Support

Attention to detail is also the hallmark of SETAF’s 22nd Area Support Group. The Vicenza-based organization provides what its commander, COL Charles A. Munson, described as “two-tiered support.”

“First, the 22nd ASG provides installation management for the military communities in Vicenza and Camp Darby in Livorno [see accompanying story], as well as for U.S. personnel assigned to the NATO headquarters in Verona,” Munson said. “That entails everything from facilities engineering, firefighting and public works to housing and child care.”

Such base operations support contributes directly to SETAF’s readiness, Munson said.

“By ensuring that the quality of life for soldiers and family members in Italy is the best we can provide, we allow soldiers to stop worrying about

their loved ones and get on with the jobs the Army asks them to do,” he said.

The second tier of support is tactical, Munson said.

“The group is unique in the sense that it’s the only area support group in Europe, and possibly in the Army, that has tactical MTOE units assigned to it,” he said. “So I have a responsibility not only to manage and lead installations, but I also have soldiers who supply combat support and combat service support to the 173rd Abn. Bde. and the 1-508th ABCT.”

That tactical support covers a range of specialized fields. The parachute riggers of the 22nd ASG’s 24th Quartermaster Co., for example, are indispensable in preparing equipment and soldiers for the mass airdrops that are SETAF’s hallmark. And the 13th Military Police Co. not only provides law-enforcement support for the military communities in Vicenza and Livorno, it also contributes MPs for exercises and real-world deployments.

“We also provide supply support,” Munson said. “When the brigade deploys, it draws its logistical support from task forces that are assigned to it. We provide its tactical combat service support while it’s in Italy.”

“The 22nd ASG provides essential services both in garrison and in the field,” Mikolashek said. “SETAF’s diverse mission requires the best from everyone, and we get that from the 22nd ASG. The group’s support is vital to both SETAF’s operational effectiveness and the quality of life for its soldiers and family members.”

A Decent Standard of Living

Quality of life for SETAF’s soldiers, family members and civilians is important, Mikolashek said, both because of its impacts on readiness and because ensuring a decent standard of living is the right thing to do.

“We ask a lot of our soldiers and DA civilian employees, and it’s only right that in return we provide them and their families with the best possible standard of living,” he said.

To further that goal, Caserma Ederle offers the usual amenities — post exchange, commissary, theater, clubs, and extensive morale, welfare and recreation opportunities. Livorno’s

Camp Darby, in keeping with its smaller size, offers scaled-down versions of the same facilities and programs [*see accompanying story*].

Housing is primarily an off-post issue, however, since the vast majority of military and civilian personnel at both Caserma Ederle and Camp Darby live on the Italian economy.

“In many ways that’s a plus,” Mikolashek said, “because it allows us

to integrate with the Italian community. But it also presents challenges, because in some cases the soldiers and their families are living in houses that aren’t quite up to U.S. standards.

“There are always things we can improve, but, overall, our soldiers, family members and Army civilian employees are well served here,” he added. “We have done and continue to do a lot in terms of renovating the barracks we do have, and of renovating our MWR facilities. And we have an excellent relationship with the Italian medical community here, which provides first-class medical care. I think if you look at all that, we’re in pretty good shape.”

That’s a view shared by many in SETAF, including Eric Moller, Vicenza’s assistant fire chief and a longtime DA civilian employee in Italy.

“I’ve lived and worked at both Vicenza and Livorno,” he said, “and I think each is great, though in different ways. And we’re living in one of the most interesting countries in Europe. There is a lot to do off post, and the travel opportunities are great. The Italians are very friendly, and crime is low in this region. The pace of life may be a little slower here than it is in the States, but once you get used to that, it’s a wonderful life.” □

A heavily laden soldier walks off the drop zone after a jump. Staying ready for immediate deployment is a necessity in SETAF.



A member of Vicenza’s fire department stands by during an aircraft refueling. Fire protection is just one of the services the 22nd ASG provides for SETAF.